



## **How to reduce the risk and effects of elite capture under community based natural resource management?**

Saito, Moeko; Nathan, Iben; Treue, Thorsten

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PHOTO: MOEKO SAITO-JENSEN

*Mohammed Nagar  
villagers in Medak, India.*

## How to reduce the risk and effects of elite capture under Community Based Natural Resource Management?

### Introduction

Community based natural resource management (CBNRM) projects and policies generally aim to improve natural resources management and rural livelihoods while promoting democratic decision making and equitable benefit distribution at the local level. However, critics argue that CBNRM is susceptible to elite capture due to existing social structures that reproduce inequality and hierarchies within communities. Elite capture generally refers to a situation

where elite groups dominate decision-making processes and monopolize benefits.

This brief contributes to the debate by exploring

- 1) whether CBNRM is prone to elite capture, and if so
- 2) whether the occurrence of elite capture is due to pre-existing social structures within communities, and/or to CBNRM policy design.



## Policy Recommendations

- Ensure minority rights through reserving a minimum number of influential positions for them and through the prohibition of rules that significantly reduce their benefits from resource utilization without their prior consent and adequate compensation.
- Ensure frequent, direct democratic elections of chairpersons and committee representatives through secret ballots.
- Ensure that key management functions and decisions are shared among and monitored by all the members of the management committee and ultimately the constituency.
- Bring marginalized groups into contact with equity promoting third parties such as government institutions or independent NGOs.

This is done on the basis of a case study of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in Andhra Pradesh, India. The study included a review of the government's official JFM policy documents and field work in a selected village, Mohammed Nagar, to trace the processes and outcomes of forest management from 1997 when JFM was introduced to 2008.

The case study focused on the following three questions:

- (1) To what extent has the Indian Government formally addressed the risk of elite capture in JFM?
- (2) What were the processes and outcomes of JFM in Mohammed Nagar?
- (3) Were incidences of elite capture in JFM in Mohammed Nagar the result of pre-existing social structures and/or the implementation of JFM?

Based on the results, this brief presents measures to reduce the risk of elite capture.

### **(1) To what extent has the Indian Government formally addressed the risk of elite capture in JFM?**

The orders issued by the Andhra Pradesh government on JFM indicate that the government had clear intentions to prevent elite capture.

The orders on JFM include measures to:

- Promote active participation of all segments of the community through mandatory representation of socially marginalized groups, such as lower castes and women, within committees;
- Ensure transparency in community activities through mandatory recording of forest management plans, meeting minutes, and account books, and;
- Prevent accumulation of power in the hands of particular people within the communities through elections of the core decision making body including the chairperson every three years.

### **(2) What were the processes and outcomes of JFM in Mohammed Nagar?**

Our case study shows that despite official intentions, elite capture did occur during the tenure of the first and second management committee from 1997 to 2007.

- Elite groups including men of higher castes (who are wealthier and less dependent on forest products) gained influential positions within the decision-making body and monopolized benefits generated from forest management activities.
- Socially disadvantaged groups such as lower castes and women (who are highly dependent on forest products) were marginalized in decision making. This resulted in new forest management rules that made them pay more user fees to the executive committee. These groups were also more frequently prosecuted and fined for rule violation.

In spite of the initial elite capture, marginalized groups successfully claimed a leadership position during the election of the third management committee in 2008, where a lower caste was chosen as chairperson of the management committee. This happened because:

- The formalized interactions under JFM gradually exposed the elite domination and exploitation to all in the community. This enabled the lower caste groups to form alliances with other castes to resist and challenge the elites.
- An NGO working in the area played an important catalytic role in sensitizing the villagers about principles of equality and in establishing consensus among different groups with conflicting interests.
- The JFM policies, which aimed at legitimizing equal rights of marginalized groups, actually created new awareness and opportunities for these groups to resist elite domination.

Accordingly, our observations suggest that even though CB-NRM is prone to elite capture, this is not necessarily a permanent outcome.



### (3) Were incidences of elite capture in JFM in Moham-med Nagar the result of pre-existing social structures and/or the implementation of JFM?

Our case study suggested that the occurrence of elite capture was largely due to:

- *Existing social structures* based on caste and gender that played a dominant role in framing collective action under JFM, reproducing and reinforcing elite capture. We also found that the occurrence of elite capture could partly be attributed to the implementation of JFM including:
- *Insufficient representation of marginalized groups in the decision-making body:* The fact that higher castes in this community constituted the majority of the population enabled them to dominate the decision-making processes in the elected committee through majority rule.
- *Insufficient safeguarding policies for those adversely affected by new management rules:* The most forest dependent people's customary use of the forest was not adequately considered by the decision-making body in the rule making processes. Nor were low caste people sufficiently compensated for the disproportional loss of forest derived benefits they experienced as a result of the new management rules.

- *Lack of official democratic election rules:* Due to unspecified election procedures, a local politician managed to manipulate the election process to nominate his candidate for the chairperson position at the second election. The politically nominated chairperson was thus more accountable to the political elite than to his formal constituency.
- *Lack of checks and balances:* Our case shows that power was accumulated in the hands of the chairpersons and that particularly the second chairperson misused these powers. Even in this case, no official procedures were available to oust a chairperson between official elections, e.g. at an extraordinary general meeting.

#### Concluding remarks

Our case study illustrates the inherent difficulties of transforming pre-existing hierarchical social structures by way of introducing new formal measures under a CBNRM initiative such as JFM. In the long-term, however, centrally defined formal measures may pave the way for increased opportunities for marginalized groups to justify their (new) rights to equal decision-making powers and a fair share of benefits. In order to harness this potential role of CBNRM, we propose the following four measures.

Village assembly meeting.



PHOTO: MOEKO SAITO-JENSEN





*Suspension bridge.*

First, CBNRM initiatives should ensure minority rights, for instance, through reserving a minimum number of influential positions for minorities and through the prohibition of implementing rules that significantly reduce their benefits from resource utilization without their prior consent and adequate compensation.

Second, CBNRM initiatives should ensure direct democratic elections of chairpersons and committee representatives through secret ballots. Although direct elections are not sufficient to guarantee a fair democratic process, frequent elections (e.g. every third year) where all residents above a certain age are entitled to vote for independent candidates through secret ballots would promote leaders' accountability towards their constituencies.

Third, CBNRM initiatives should ensure that key management functions and decisions are shared among and monitored by all the members of the management committee and ultimately the constituency. This would counter the concentration of unchecked powers in the hands of one leader. Mandatory record keeping, public auditing and procedures to oust leaders who abuse their public mandates are important measures in this regard.

Fourth, CBNRM initiatives should bring marginalized groups into contact with equity promoting third parties such as government institutions or independent NGOs. The engagement of a third party may promote inclusion and equal status of the marginalized in decision-making processes, strengthen their capacity to resist unfair operational rules and claim a fair share of benefits.

For more information about the study and its results, please refer to Saito-Jensen et al. (2010).

#### **Authors**

*Moeko Saito-Jensen, post.doc research fellow (mosa@life.ku.dk), Iben Nathan, senior researcher (in@life.ku.dk), and Thorsten Treue, associate professor (ttr@life.ku.dk), Danish Center for Forest, Landscape and Planning, University of Copenhagen.*

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#### **Series editor**

*Jens Friis Lund  
Danish Centre for Forest, Landscape and Planning  
Rolighedsvej 23  
DK-1958 Frederiksberg  
Denmark  
Tel. +45 3533 1500  
www.sl.life.ku.dk*

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